

Rebuilding After a Disaster
Council President Scott Peters, First District
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Living in California entails a certain amount of risk. The enjoyment we gain from our great weather and the beauty of our natural surroundings is sometimes offset by the inherent danger of natural disaster such as earthquakes, landslides and wildfires. For the direct victims of those disasters, there's no joy at all.

Here in San Diego, we are familiar with these risks. My heart goes out to the thousands of victims of the October wildfires, as well as the victims of the landslide on Mount Soledad. While these two disasters differ in size and type of destruction, both have a tremendous impact on the lives of affected residents.

As we have after other natural disasters, San Diego will rebuild. The City learned many lessons after the wildfires of 2003. Many of those lessons have already been put into action. Before the fires were even out, a local assistance center opened in Rancho Bernardo to help residents access the range of services available to them. This model was developed in Scripps Ranch after the Cedar Fire.

The City will expedite the permitting process for homeowners wishing to rebuild, and fees will be waived for demolition and building permits and for debris disposal. Victims of the Mount Soledad landslide qualify for these services as well.

Other changes implemented since 2003 helped prevent major loss of life and even greater structure loss. Mandatory brush clearance zones protected homes adjacent to open space by creating a defensible space around them. The Reverse 911 system provided residents with timely information, allowing them to evacuate early and safely. The countywide 211 information system provided updates on evacuation zones, road closures, and other important information.

Our regional readiness for wildfires has greatly improved since 2003, and most people are pleased with our response this month. Now, as we move from emergency to recovery, we will reflect as we always do about what we have learned and what we can do better next time. County officials underestimated the response to the 211 service, and should invest now in additional web capacity and telephone operators. The Reverse 911 system only places calls to landlines. As more and more families abandon traditional landlines for cell phones, it becomes imperative that we add those numbers to the emergency systems. Residents can register their cell phones with the Reverse 911 system through the City's website, www.sandiego.gov.

Other changes need to be made as well. We continue to wait for the California Coastal Commission to approve brush clearance in the coastal zone, including La Jolla. While I recognize the need to protect our natural resources along the coast, there is an even greater need to protect the homes and lives of our citizens living there.

Although this year's fires destroyed thousands of homes and buildings, the damage could have been so much worse, if not for the hard work of the men and women of our fire agencies. Their tireless efforts to protect lives and property, and their individual acts of bravery and heroism remind us of the important role these first responders play in our community. I hope you will join me in thanking them and supporting their efforts to protect San Diego from future disasters.